

Prayer in the Shoah

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This essay was prepared as a meditation to accompany the prayerbook, *Machzor Wolfsberg*, published by Yad Vashem. The *Machzor* contains High Holiday prayers transcribed from memory by Satmar Hazan Naphtali Stern, z"l, in 1944, in preparation for the Rosh Hashanah service he was about to lead in the Wolfsberg Labor Camp. (Hazan Stern recounts that he wrote the prayers "in pen, on paper torn from cement bags that I purchased [at great risk to his own life] in exchange for bread." Since then, "for forty three years, the pages were always stored in [my family] *Machzor*." When Stern decided to give the pages to Yad Vashem for safekeeping, he broke out in tears, kissed them and said, "I made a supreme effort to safeguard these. I did not know then, in the camp, that these writings would become a national treasure. God willing, they will remain before my eyes on Rosh Hashanah."¹ I, too, was an inmate in Wolfsberg, and I remember the prayer service. The service was held in an overcrowded hall, and – still a young man of sixteen – I could not push my way in and remained outside. But what went on inside left a deep impression. This was the only time that we were permitted to gather together in the camp and pray out loud. The prayers that were uttered that day were the traditional ones, composed in a different age and under very different conditions. Nevertheless, among the traditional prayers, one was uttered as a prayer of the heart with a unique *kavanah*, unique to the incomparable conditions of the prayers. This essay is a meditation on that prayer.

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¹ The general description of Hazan Stern, as well as the citations from his memoirs, are taken from the foreword to this book.

There is no society without worshippers,
There is no time without someone who prays
There is no place that cannot be transformed into a place of prayer
And there is no human being who does not, in the privacy of his heart,
Embrace a silent prayer, offered up to the hidden powers,
To reddem him from his distress
To improve his condition and to better his lot.

The human being is a being who prays

Prayer is individual; each person has his own prayer. The sages, to be sure, canonized Jewish prayer and prohibited any changes in it. On the one hand, this prohibition made rabbinic prayer publicly recognizable, so that worshippers would feel at home in every synagogue they entered and could participate in every prayer they heard. On the other hand, the prohibition increased the risk that rabbinic prayer might become routine.

Even when prayers are similar in content, they differ in the emphasis, enthusiasm, and heartbreak that should accompany them. The worshipper's mood determines the intensity and devotion (*devekut*) of prayer, and this changes from day to day and hour to hour. No one prays with the same intentionality (*kavanah*) on two different occasions, just as no one enters precisely the same body of water on two occasions. The restlessness of the human heart releases feelings that stimulate ever new intentionalities of prayer. No two people, therefore, pray with the same intentionality, just as no two people experience the same mood. Although the Rabbinic tradition of prayer is fixed, the accompaniments of prayer change from person to person and from time to time. This is how it always was, and this is how it was in the camps.

If we are, therefore, to assess what uniquely characterized prayer in the Nazi labor camps, we should not search for some new prayer. Beside our reluctance to change prayers, particularly on the High Holidays, the torture and fear that prevailed in the concentration camps and forced labor camps silenced the creative urge. We should also not expect to find some particular, traditional prayer that became a favorite to most of the worshippers in the camps. Most worshippers simply prayed according to their usual manner

and custom. Only a very few exceptional individuals were aware of their terrible circumstances, understood the substance and significance of the words of prayer, and were sensitive to the theological problems entailed in their being uttered in that place. They sought some traditional prayer that would express their deep longing to overcome the forces arrayed against them, and their sense that the suffering and misery around them was the result of satanic, cosmic forces over which they had no control or influence. They found such a prayer in the prayer “מְלוֹךְ עַל כָּל־הָעוֹלָם בְּכַבְּדוֹךְ” (*elobeinu v'elohai avotenu m'loch al kol ha'olam bikhvodekha*); “Our God and God of our ancestors, reign over all the world in your full glory...” In this prayer, which belongs to the Amidah for Rosh Hashanah, we ask God to reign alone, to take the reins in his hands, and not allow these satanic forces to prevail.

To understand the full meaning of this prayer, we must first reflect deeply on the question that grounds all Holocaust theology: **Do we attribute the Shoah to sin?** Lest there be any doubt about my own response to this question, I will state my conclusions at the outset. *It is written in the Torah, a second time in the Prophets, a third time in the Writings, and a fourth time in the words of our sages, that the Shoah was not the consequence of sin.*

“IT WAS WRITTEN IN THE TORAH” – WHERE?

“And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, nor will I loathe them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them” (Leviticus 26-44). After the Torah warns the children of Israel that, if they sin, they will be driven out of their land and suffer disease, war and famine (to the point of eating human flesh), it closes with the assurance that, despite their sins, God will not despise or reject or annihilate them (*yavi otam l'kilayon*) and will not abrogate the covenant that he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. *According to the covenant made between God and Israel, they would not be destroyed for their sins.*

What does the word *l'khalotam*, “to annihilate them,” mean? Should we understand this in a quantitative or qualitative sense? Does it mean that He will not *completely* destroy them – to the point that not even a survivor or

refugee is left – or that He will not destroy to such an extent that they cannot rebuild their lives? Those who claim that the Shoah is a result of sin will interpret *l'khalotam* quantitatively, as total annihilation, total extermination. From this perspective, if any survivor remained, then, even though most of the population was destroyed, this would not count as “total annihilation” and would not therefore weaken God’s promise to Israel. These interpreters believe that since there were survivors who rebuilt their lives and also contributed to the enhancement of Judaism — even though very few Jews from Eastern Europe survived – a small part of the promise must have been kept. In this view, those who were destroyed were punished for their sins. These interpreters, therefore, believe that the Shoah was a consequence of sin. *This interpretation is incorrect and misguided.*

L'khalotam does not mean total extermination,² the killing of a people or a large part of it, but rather the irremediable destruction of a people’s institutional infrastructure. And this is precisely what happened in the Shoah: institutional Jewish life in Eastern Europe was uprooted and almost totally erased; the only survivors were as brands snatched from the fire. The limits of *lo l'khalotam* were blurred and suspended, and the covenant God made with Israel was shaken if not totally abrogated. *We cannot, therefore, attribute the Shoah to sin.* God promised not to destroy Israel for their sins, and there is no greater destruction in history than the Shoah.

As for the kinds of destruction that God might bring as a punishment for sin: this could result in the people’s being exiled to a foreign land, as characterized in the first Rebuke (*tokbecha*) in *parashat bechukotai* (Leviticus 26). Or, this kind of destruction could result in the people’s being conquered while on their own soil, as characterized in the second Rebuke in *parashat ki tavo* (Deuteronomy 28). In both cases, individuals die from disease, war, famine, and other causes.³

We must bear in mind that the relationship between destruction and sin is

² See Psalms 83.

³ Later, when I consider the generation of the sages, I will comment on such explanations of *l'khalotam* as in, for example, Rabbi Eliahu Mizrahi’s commentary on Leviticus 26. As in the commentaries on the word “*l'khalotam*,” for example, in the commentary of R. Eliahu Mizrahi on Leviticus 26, I will comment on this when we turn to consider the rabbinic sages..

different from the relationship between exile and sin. On several occasions, the Torah takes note of the relationship between exile and sin and even offers the following reason for it. The people who first inhabited the Land were expelled and killed because of their abominations. The Torah was, therefore, concerned to specify what these abominations were in minute detail, so that the children of Israel would be clearly warned: if they, too, turned toward these abominations, they would have no more right than their predecessors to remain in the land. Like the first inhabitants, they too would be expelled. In the language of the Torah, "the land will vomit them out." "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways," so that "the land will not vomit you out the way it vomited out the nation that came before you" (Leviticus 8.28 and 20.22). There is therefore legal justification for the belief that "We were exiled from our land on account of our sins" (*mipnei chatotenu galinu me'artsenu*).

But there is no justification for relating *khilayon* ("annihilation") to sin. The Holy One promised Israel that, even if they were in the land of their enemies, He would not annihilate them nor destroy their capacities to reorganize their lives and return to their land. When their land was conquered, He promised to remove the yoke of the nations from their necks so that they might re-establish themselves. In our own age, most of the edifice of Judaism has been destroyed beyond repair by the cruelest actions in human history. We must not blame such a catastrophe on the sins of its victims. Anyone who does so denies the promises God made to Israel and merits our careful scrutiny (*"v'tsarich l'vudok acharov"*).

"IT WAS WRITTEN IN THE PROPHETS?" – WHERE?

In the Torah, the proof for our thesis can be found only by analyzing the word *l'khalotam* ("to annihilate you"). In the Prophets, especially the book of Jeremiah, the evidence is clear, and precise. I will cite and interpret only the primary prooftexts: Jeremiah's prayer in chapter 10:24: "Chastise me, O Lord, but in measure, not according to your anger, lest You reduce me to nothing"; and God's promise in chapters 30:11 and 46:28: "For I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. I will make an end of all the nations among which I

have dispersed you. But I will not make an end of you. I will not leave you unpunished, but I will chastise you in measure.” Jeremiah prays that, while chastising Israel for their sins, God will chastise them “only in measure.” Radak interprets this as “as much as we can suffer,” according to our capacities. Individuals will suffer disease, war, famine, and other deaths, but the “door-posts” (*amot basipim*) will not be moved, and the bases for everyday existence will not be undone. Communal activities will continue, even if in terrible suffering – but without destruction. This point is emphasized again in the words *al be’apecha*, “Do not act out of your wrath,” please, do not be angry, *pen yamitenu* “lest we die,” lest we be annihilated, *tibe kaliah*. In Radak’s reading, “if you chastise us in anger, you will reduce us to something less than a people” (*Im teyasreni be’apcha, tam’iteni mi’heyot goy*). But if you chastise us in measure, we will remain a people: our corporate life will continue even after Your chastisement.

Jeremiah’s prayer was accepted, and, in chapters 30:11 and 46:28, the Holy One promises Israel, “I will indeed chastise you in measure and will not utterly destroy you.” In Radak’s reading, “I will chastise you in proportion to what you can tolerate, not in proportion to my anger and fury, and not in proportion to your evil deeds.” That is to say, your evil deeds merit your annihilation, but our God is a god of compassion and mercy and would not inflict total destruction. Radak offers this evidently ancient reading from Targum Yonatan, which reads: “You will suffer God’s chastisements, but will be spared the full extent of the law” (Ch. 10) – that is, you will be spared annihilation. The Targum adds, in Ch. 30: “you will suffer chastisements for the sake of instruction, but you will be spared the full extent of the law. The Targum adds *l’alfutecha* – “to teach you” – and Rashi adds *me’at me’at* (“little by little”). Both Rashi and the Targum thus extend the meaning of the word *l’mishpat* (“in measure”) in order to indicate that the chastisements will not be too strong. This says explicitly that the Holy One will chastise Israel in proportion to their sins but will not annihilate them. The Holy One gave this promise only to Israel. As for individuals, while they may suffer death, they may also avert the decree through repentance, prayers, and charity, although there is no promise that these will succeed.⁴

What happened in the Shoah is above and beyond measure (*l’mishpat*):

above and beyond suffering, above and beyond any punishment. There is no transgression that merits such punishment. Such utter destruction has never transpired before in history, has never before been fashioned by Satan, and it cannot be attributed to sin. Whoever attributes the Shoah to sin denies the promise God made on two occasions to the prophet Jeremiah: “with respect to you” (*itcha*) – the people Israel – “I will not bring annihilation and will not utterly destroy” (*lo eese khale venake lo anakecha*). Such a person not only accuses the sufferers slanderously with having caused their own suffering, but also indirectly belittles the guilt of the truly guilty by implying that they only did what they had to do. If not they, then some others would have had to do this. *Such things must not be uttered!*

I cannot fail to take note of the texts that appear to contradict my claim that sins do not bring annihilation. Most texts that appear to contradict my reading of *khala* are easily reconciled by noting that, in these texts, *khala* does not apply to all Israel or even most of Israel, but only to individuals and groups who are not included in the promise that God made “not to annihilate them.” Among such texts are Jeremiah 9:15, “I will send the sword after them until I have consumed them”; Jeremiah 14:12, “I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by disease”; and Ezekiel 5:13, “I will vent my fury on them.” One case is, however, difficult to reconcile in this way: Jeremiah’s prophecy on “the Remnant of Judah” (*sh’erit yehuda*) in Jeremiah 42:44. The difficulty gets stronger when we see that the sources there are contradictory, and that the matter belongs among God’s secrets, *behadı k’vshi derachmana*. Let us therefore consider the matter at length.

In chapter 44:12-14, Jeremiah prophesies about the Remnant of Judah in Egypt: “In the land of Egypt, they will fall by the sword, they will be consumed by famine, young and old alike they will die by sword and famine.... Of the Remnant of Judah who came to live in Egypt, no survivor or fugitive will be left....” Only refugees will return, and all this destruction comes “Because you burned incense and poured libations to the Queen of Heaven,” “And because you sinned against the Lord and did not listen to His voice” (44.23). Jeremiah

⁴ See Psalms 118:18: “The Lord has severely afflicted me, but has not delivered me to death”; and see the Mishnah and the Gemara in *Yoma* 85b-86a.

prophesies that, because of their sins, “all the men of Judah will perish...in Egypt.” This source might appear to contradict my claim that the Holy One promised not to destroy even a large part of Israel. My response is that the Remnant of Judah was then a small group: a few people who asked Jeremiah to pray for them. They said, “We remain a few of many” (42:20). They chose a perverse path and, against their own vital interests, decided not to stay in the country and accept Babylonian rule. Rejecting the prophet’s promise that the Babylonians would pity them and return them to their land, they escaped to Egypt at the very time it was about to fall to Nebuchadnezzar.⁵ They did so only through their obstinate belief that going to Egypt would enable them to continue their idol worship: “to burn incense and pour libations to the Queen of Heaven.” They complained that only this idol worship would save them from calamity: “Ever since we stopped making offerings to the Queen of Heaven and pouring libations to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by sword and famine” (44:18). “Going to Egypt” thus became a symbol of the strength of idol worship, and this is what Jeremiah tried to prevent with all the prophetic powers he possessed.

The center of public institutional and creative life was then in the Babylonian captivity, by the River Chebar. For the thirty years that they were there (Jehoiachin’s exile was in 597 B.C.E.), the exiles strengthened and expanded their communal life. There Ezekiel prophesied. There the people mourned when they heard of the destruction of the Temple (Ezekiel 7); and there they built houses, planted vineyards, and sought, through prayer and synagogue life, to find a temporary substitute for the Temple service. At the same time, the Remnant of Judah withered in Egypt like an atrophied limb on the Jewish body, cut off from the rest of the exiles, isolated, and drawn toward idol worship. All this, despite the Prophet’s frequent warnings that they would suffer the same fate as the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, who were completely destroyed. They did not listen and as a result suffered an even more devastating fate and nothing remained of them. They were

⁵ According to the scholars, Jeremiah prophesied about the remnant of Judah around the year 568 B.C.E., a year before Nebuchadnezzar conquered Egypt, in the 27th year of his reign (as written in Ezekiel 29:17).

judged as individual idolaters, or as members of a “a city condemned for idolatry” (*ir hanidachai*), and therefore God’s promises did not apply to them.⁶

According to Josephus (*Antiquities* 10.9.7) and to Rabbi Joseph Karo’s commentary on Jeremiah 44:14 (citing *Seder Olam*), some of the Remnant of Judah survived when Nebuchadnezzar captured Egypt and took the Jews of Egypt captive.⁷ For this reason, we cannot compare what happened to the Remnant of Judah with what happened in our generation. The martyrs murdered in the Shoah represented the backbone of the Jewish people. Although not all of them were believers, all of them rejected paganism and the Sages said, long ago, “Whoever rejects idolatry is judged as one who affirms the whole Torah.”

“IT WAS WRITTEN IN THE WRITINGS” – WHERE?

Within the Writings, we will focus primarily on Nehemiah 9. In this chapter, the author offers an historical survey, from the creation of heaven and earth (“You made the heavens, the highest heavens, the earth and everything that is on it,” 9:6) until his own day (“Here we are today,” 9:36). Briskly and clearly, he summarizes the miracles that God performed for Israel, the commandments, the ordinances, and the Torah that God commanded them, and also the people’s obstinacy in rejecting His commandments and abandoning His Torah. God punished them and delivered them to their enemies: “Their enemies oppressed them. In their time of trouble, they cried to You and You heard them from heaven” (9:27); “But after they had rest from their troubles, they again committed evils before You...and You heard them from heaven and rescued them out of Your great compassion, again and again” (9:28). He saves them despite their sins and their insolence, because He is “gracious and merciful, long-suffering, and of great kindness” (9:17). Despite their sins and their insolence, He refrained from destroying them (*l’khalotam*), even when their “iniquities are overwhelming.” Five times, the author states that out of

⁶ See Deuteronomy 13:3, and the debate between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva in *Tosefta Sanbedrin* 4:3.

⁷ See also *Seder Olam* (Ritner edition), at the end of chapter 26

His great mercy, God did not abandon them, but saved them in times of trouble. He stresses, moreover, that "Out of Your great compassion, You did not destroy them or abandon them, for You are a gracious and compassionate God" (9:31). They deserved to be destroyed, but He spared them out of His great mercy and refrained from utterly destroying them.

The way Nehemiah 9 employs the term *khala* implies that, in other places in the Bible as well, the term *khala* does not refer to complete annihilation. In the promise, "I will not utterly destroy you," (*lo easeh khala*), *khala* does not refer to the literal annihilation of all Israel, but to the irremediable destruction of Israel's institutional foundations. It is absurd to associate the attributes of the One who is merciful and compassionate with the destruction of a major part of the people. Individuals or even small groups may suffer death, but *clal yisrael* remains and is slowly rebuilt; or, if exiled, it is eventually returned to its land. This was God's promise to Jeremiah, and this was the reason Nehemiah spoke of God's attributes of mercy and compassion. *In His great mercies He saves Israel from the threshold of destruction.*⁸

"IT WAS WRITTEN IN THE RABBINIC LITERATURE" – WHERE?

Let us return to the rebuke in Leviticus 26 about which we opened our discussion of the Torah. Numbered among the curses are three that would appear, on a literal reading, to speak of *kaliab*, total destruction: "I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheath the sword against you" (26:33), and "You will perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies will consume you" (26:38). God, in other words, will disperse you among the nations, among whom you will be assimilated, and the "land" – that is, the people living on the land – will utterly consume you. The sages explained these curses differently, however. For the *Mekhilta*, "I will scatter you" (*etchem ezereh*) does not mean "I will annihilate you," but, rather, "you will not be exiled in only one place" – since, "when the people of one country are exiled

⁸ Jeremiah's admonition, "No pity, compassion or mercy will stop Me from destroying them," applies only to individuals.

to a single place, they can see each other and are therefore consoled. But you will not be treated so. You will be dispersed so far apart from one another that you will be unable to see each other and ease the suffering. *You will suffer*, therefore, *but you will also live*; you will not be in danger of extinction.”

Rashi offers a similar interpretation, reading “You will perish among the nations” (*ve'avadaten bagoyim*)⁹ to mean that “you will be lost,” rather than “annihilated.” “When you are dispersed you will be ‘lost to’ (distant from) each other,” and you will not enjoy the help and consolation that members of a group provide each other. Ibn Ezra interprets the end of the verse – “the land will consume you” (*ve'achla etchem*) – in the same spirit: that is, “most of those who are exiled to a new place tend to die from the change of climate and water” (but not literally “most,” since, except for those with stomach or lung problems, most people will get used to the new climate). Thus, Ibn Ezra also interprets *kaliah* (“total destruction”) to mean “the death of many individuals” rather than literal “annihilation.” In his commentary on Rashi, Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi claims that Rashi – and one could also add Ibn Ezra and the *Mekhilta* – would explain that “the exiles would not literally perish, since, if so, how would God maintain His promise? Instead, God assures them that, even when they are in the land of their enemies, He will not despise them so much that they would perish.”

These commentators interpret *l'khalotam*, as we have suggested earlier in our discussion, as referring to the promise that God will not “destroy the community of Israel beyond repair.” Had they, indeed, interpreted it to mean that God will not “utterly destroy Israel,” then they would have read the three curses according to their apparently literal meaning. In this case, “I will scatter you among the nations,” “you will be lost among the nations,” and “the land of your enemies will consume you” would all refer to *khalia* as “utter destruction.” Even though these commentators do not mention Jeremiah’s prayer (in 10:24) and God’s promise not to destroy Israel (in 30:10; 46:29), this prayer and this promise must have been on their minds when they offered

⁹ We may assume that Rashi based his explanation on the ancient midrash and that he had also seen *Midrash Tehilim* on Psalm 78:38: “And He is compassionate, forgives iniquity, and does not destroy, but turns His anger away and does not awaken all his wrath.” The midrash adds, “all His wrath is not awakened, but a little of it is.”

their interpretation. This prayer and promise also needs to be kept today as a sign and a warning not to attribute the Shoah to sin. *There is no sin or transgression that merits a punishment like the Shoah.*

Everything I have said so far concerns *clal yisrael*: that Israel would not be destroyed as a collectivity. Individuals may, however, still die from their transgressions, whether punished by heaven or by humans (in the courts). This matter is very complicated, and I raise it only to explain that all Israel, or most of its foundations, will not be destroyed, even when it has filled its full measure of sin. The Talmud (*Shabbat 55a*) has a difference of opinion about whether or not individuals suffer the punishment of death even when they do not sin. (I will not at this time discuss the corresponding argument in the Book of Job, since it is of a different type). Rabbi Ami¹⁰ determines that “there is no death without sin and no suffering without transgression.” The Gemara argues, however, based on a Baraita,¹¹ that there is death without sin, and from that we may deduce that there is also suffering without transgression.¹² If this were a halakhic argument, then certainly all the decisors would judge according to the Baraita,¹³ particularly after the Gemara closes by affirming that “the refutation of Rav Ami stands.”¹⁴ Since, however, this is a non-halakhic argument (in which case one is not required to follow the received opinion of the Gemara), it is possible to follow one of the minority opinions, even one that was rejected.¹⁵

For this reason, some of the Rishonim – especially those with philosophic approaches, like the Rambam and the Meiri – abandoned the conclusion of the Gemara and were drawn to Rav Ami’s idea that there is no death without sin and no suffering without transgression. They were captivated by the philosophically more convincing and eloquent saying that “God does not withhold the reward of any creature” (*Pesachim 118a, Bava Kamma 38b*)

¹⁰ An Amora from the land of Israel, despite the fact that our editions say “Rav” Ami, who lived at the end of the third century.

¹¹ The source of which is in the Tannaitic generation that ended at the end of the second century.

¹² See the Tosafot there that begins with *v’sbma minab* (“from this we may infer”).

¹³ The first Baraita is also quoted in the Sifre *Deuteronomy* ch. 339.

¹⁴ “Unlike a *kashia*, whenever it says *tiyuuta*, the law is fully nullified” (a tradition of the Geonim). See the lexicon, the entry for “Refutation” (*tiyuuta*), and the *Shita Mekubetset* on *Baba Batra* 52b.

¹⁵ See Rambam’s commentary on *Mishnah Sota* Ch. 3, Mishnah 3.

and does not punish people who have not brought it on themselves. The Rambam argues this way, for example, in the *Guide for the Perplexed* (III 17:311). After summarizing the five opinions that people appear to hold about Providence, he says, “We believe that Providence always brings human beings what they deserve, and far be it from God to punish anyone who was not deserving... And almost all of our sages say clearly that there is no death without sin and no suffering without transgression.” Similarly, after bringing the opinion of the multitude, “that God brings sufferings independently of sin,” the Rambam says that “the principle of Torah that runs counter to this opinion is contained in His dictum, may He be exalted, ‘A God of faithfulness and without iniquity.’ Nor do all the sages share this opinion of the multitude, since they said, long ago, ‘There is no death without sin and no suffering without transgression.’ And this is the opinion that ought to be followed by all Torah scholars endowed with intellect, for they should not ascribe injustice to God” (in III 24:329). There is a hint here that the saying “God does not withhold the reward of any creature” remains controversial,¹⁶ but, in any event, the Rambam disregards the Gemara’s refutation.

Unlike the Rambam, Rav Menachem Hameiri does not disregard the Gemara’s refutation; he cites it and then seeks to invalidate it:

The essence of religion is to believe that God oversees everything that happens, from good to bad. For God does not withhold the reward of any creature, for better or worse, and thus it is said that there is no death without sin and no punishment without transgression... Even though the Gemara retained another view in its refutation, the principles of faith do not depend on the testimony of the plain sense of Scripture and of Aggadah. And it is well known that we do not base refutations on Aggadot. (*Bet Habechira* on Shabbat 55b)

The Meiri not only rejects the Gemara’s refutation (he considers the Baraita merely a popular Aggadah), but also establishes a general principle: the essence of faith should not be based on “the plain sense of Scripture and

¹⁶ Except that he is inconsistent. By using the term “multitude” he leaves it to be understood that they are the majority, while the language of “not all the sages share this opinion” leaves us a sense that they are in a minority.

Aggadah,” but, rather, on that inquiry and deliberation that emerge from Scriptures and, perhaps, the Aggadot. This is, in fact, a fundamental principle of medieval Jewish philosophy, serving as well as a guide to textual exegesis: how to relate to the text, what to take from it, and what not.

We cannot determine whether these philosophic exegetes apply their retributive doctrine of “no sin without punishment and no punishment without sin” to *clal yisrael* or only to individuals. Do they read God’s promise to the prophet Jeremiah (not to destroy Israel even when their crimes require it) as a denial of the doctrine that God does not withhold the reward of any creature, for better or worse? Or do they believe that God treats *clal yisrael* differently – bestowing unmerited favor on them as a part of the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? It is hard to prove either reading from the Scriptural verses, since the Rambam and the Meiri are not interested in the “external (or plain) meanings of the Tanakh,” while we put all our trust in the plain sense of the text – which shows that Israel, or a large part of Israel, may indeed sin without appropriate punishment.

Since the Shoah must not be seen as a consequence of sin, we conclude that it remains an unsolved enigma. Whoever seeks to explain the Shoah reduces it to some natural phenomena, belittles its evil, and assuages the guilt of those who perpetrated it. Nevertheless, we need to find an appropriate metaphor to express our understanding that the victims had no part in their own suffering, and that nothing they had done or had not done would have altered the constellation of their sufferings. The Shoah came upon them as a result of cosmological forces that collided and struggled with each other and thus struck the apple of the eye of history – the people of Israel. We turn to this theme in the second part of our discussion.

TEN MEASURES OF EVIL DESCENDED INTO THE WORLD.
NINE WERE TAKEN BY OUR GENERATION AND ONE BY THE
REST OF HISTORY.

In the previous section, we based our argument on God's promise to Jeremiah that He would not utterly destroy Israel because of their sins: *v'nakeh lo anakekha*. On the basis of this promise, we concluded that what happened to us in our generation was not a consequence of our sins. It was not because of their sins that toddlers and babies suffocated in gas chambers. They suffocated because human evil reached its pinnacle in our time.

Human history is rich in wickedness, malice, and crime. But our generation has exceeded all its predecessors in its cruelty, in its malicious determination to destroy everything Jewish, through the cruelest means, and by use of the most powerful forces. My heart stops when I read comparisons between the Shoah and anything that happened before it. There are those – including the most respected and influential Holocaust theologians – who see only a quantitative difference between the Shoah and the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the persecution and the slaughter of the Jews under Chmielnicki in 1648-49. In previous centuries, the killers thought they were raising the souls of their victims to a higher plane, that what they were doing was for their own good, to save them from worse suffering in the next world. Their crushing hatred was not primarily against Israel as a people or a race, but against its religion. Those who accepted Christianity were released. But, in our generation, the Jews had no way out. Whoever was born Jewish or was of Jewish descent was condemned to be executed, and nothing could change the decree. This should not be taken lightly. During the previous persecutions, the sufferers found solace in the belief that they were dying as martyrs. There was no such solace for most of those slaughtered in our generation – and among them were those who endured heart-wrenching despair because they could find no meaning and value in their suffering.

All this and more. It is estimated that, in one week in Auschwitz, more Jews died, through a terrible variety of deaths, than in all the previous persecutions put together. The quantitative difference is so great that the difference in quantity itself becomes a difference in quality. We read in

Lamentations, "Little children begged for bread" (4:4); in Auschwitz, Majdanek, and the other death camps, there were no little children. They were gassed immediately. The destruction and devastation that comes in the wake of such massive killing undermines the very foundations of public life. When there are only a few victims of such murder, communal life continues to function; but the difference between a small number of victims and a very large number is the difference between life and death for the people as a whole.

Beyond any comparisons between the Shoah and various pogroms, I also reject any comparisons between the Shoah and destructions of both the First and Second Temples. The Shoah surpasses them in cruelty, hatred, and the magnitude of destruction. I am not referring to spiritual life. The destruction of the First Temple initiated religious transformations that would continue for generations. It led to a process of religious decentralization that resulted in the growth of synagogues and in the emergence of new sources of religious authority. Responsibility for administering religious life was handed over from a select few – the Kohanim and Levi'im, whose positions were hereditary and who performed their functions only at certain set times of prayer, on Sabbaths and Holidays, for the people of Israel as a whole – to every individual, whose prayers were offered every day and all times of the year.

The conditions after the destruction of the Second Temple were different. To be sure, the center of religious life, the Temple, was destroyed, and sacrificial services were discontinued. But it is not clear that the destruction led to a general impoverishment of spiritual life. Most of the Kohanim were Sadducees and conducted their rituals according to Sadducean custom, despite the objections of the sages (who applied to some of them the text of Proverbs 10:7, "The name of the wicked will rot" [*Mishnah Yoma*, 3:11]). Furthermore, during the Second Temple period, the Beit Midrash, the center of both midrash and Mishnah, entered into serious competition with the Temple. Through *talmud torah*, the study of Torah, a person could feel close to God even without entering the Temple and without offering sacrifices. The Beit Midrash, moreover, was open to people from all classes of society, and not only to the aristocracy.

Even though the Amoraim living in the land of Israel longed for the Temple and enacted several laws and ordinances "in memory of the Temple" (*zekher*

l'mikdash), it is noteworthy that the Palestinian sources do not include the kind of statement that we find in the Babylonian Talmud (for example in Betsah 5d): "The Temple may soon be rebuilt, and people would say, did we do so last year or not...? Now, too, let us do so or not..." In place of such a statement, the Palestinian Amoraim use the phrase, "in memory of the Temple," which gives the impression that they had already abandoned hope and that nothing more remained of the Temple than memories. To declare, however, that "The Temple will speedily be rebuilt" is to share one's hope that it *will* very soon be rebuilt (and, when this happens, the people will remember how differently they behaved the year before). Distant from the events of the destruction in time and place, the Babylonian Amoraim reflected nostalgically on the possibility of rebuilding the Temple, while those who lived in the land of Israel, closer to the events, understood the situation more realistically. Within the Tannaitic literature, unlike the Prophetic literature, it is difficult to draw any broad, qualitative distinctions between Tannaim who lived before the destruction and those who lived after it; they are all of one piece. The destruction did not change them. They remained devoted to the study of the Torah and drew their spiritual life from it. *The Destruction did not weaken their spiritual life.*

As for the devastation itself, there are no similarities. Neither the Babylonians nor the Romans were racists; neither sought to destroy a whole people – man, woman, and child – because they belonged to a lower race. The Babylonians and Romans were both cruel towards their enemies and crushed those who rebelled against them with hair-raising brutality, extending as well to entire families. "The king of Babylon had Zedekiah's children slaughtered at Riblah before his eyes; the king of Babylon had all the nobles of Judah slaughtered. Then the eyes of Zedekiah were put out" (Jeremiah 39:6-7). But he appears not to have touched the common folk and the poorest of the population (*dalet ha-am*). Such conquerors were empire builders and, when they were convinced that all danger of rebellion had passed, they tended to deal mercifully with the inhabitants of their empires. A portion of Israel's population, the common folk and the poor, remained at home; another portion, the aristocrats and the intelligentsia, were forced to exchange residencies with a foreign population, on the assumption that, in their new setting, they would

find it more difficult to organize new rebellions. As further evidence that Nebuchadnezzar was not a racist, we may note that he left a remnant of Judah's population behind and appointed Gedaliah, son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, to rule over them (Jeremiah 40:12). If Ishmael, son of Nathalia, had not killed Gedaliah, son of Ahikam, then, despite the dislocations caused by the exile in Babylon, the fundamental institutions of Judean social life would have remained intact under Nebuchadnezzar's rule. Would Jeremiah have encouraged the Remnant of Judah to remain in the land under the protection of the King of Babylon if Nebuchadnezzar had been a second Hitler? From outside sources, we know that the exiles lived in peaceful regions of Babylon, freely, under local rule. Is this what happened in our generation? In our generation, whoever revealed any sign of Jewishness was killed, whether toddler, or child, or old and infirm. How is it possible to make comparisons?

What I have said concerning the Babylonians applies also to the Romans in the initial phase of their rule. Almost two hundred years passed between the Roman conquest of the land (in the middle of the first century B.C.E.) and their suppression of the Bar Kokhba rebellion (which they ended by murdering the population). Through this period, as long as the Romans could maintain their hegemony, they did not intervene in the inner life of the occupied population in its religion and culture. They demanded signs of submission from the elders and the leaders of the population (which were expected on the birthdays of Caesar, or on any special days of celebration); and, of course, they were interested in taxes and soldiers. But they left all other matters in the hands of the local inhabitants. The Jews exploited this opportunity and periodically broke out in rebellion, until the Romans eventually came to despise them and to make plans for suppressing this "rebellious tribe." The suppression was ruthless. The Romans slaughtered the population, sold them into slavery, and tore down the fundamental institutions of Jewish life. Had the rebels given in, the Romans would not have crushed the Bar Kokhba rebellion with such barbarous cruelty. *One must not compare the suppression of a rebellion with the annihilation of an entire population that wants to live in peace.*

It is difficult for me to imagine that anyone who was himself in a concentration camp – and whose own flesh bore signs of the destruction of an entire people, by way of horrible sufferings – would compare what he saw

to any other event in history. There have, indeed, been other events of mass murder, but nothing that achieved the total destruction of a people. For those whose information comes only from news reports, word of mouth, and books, it may be difficult to distinguish between one tragedy and another; and the shock of what they hear or read may numb their sense of perception and lead them to suppose that all these tragedies are the same. But it is not so. *There is a hierarchy even among tragedies, and the tragedy that met our generation belongs at the top.* It is unparalleled in history.

A KABBALISTIC RESPONSE

Earlier, I rejected the notion that the Shoah is a consequence of sin, and I attributed it, instead, to human evil, which reached its terrible apogee in our days. At the same time, I also recognize that this notion is comforting to Jews who believe that God intervenes in history for the good of Israel, so long as the people's sins do not tip the scales of judgment against them. Since, in our day, the scales were certainly tipped against Israel, God did not in fact intervene. According to this reasoning, however, if the Shoah were not the result of sin, then it would be difficult to explain why God was apparently indifferent in our days and chose not to intervene. Why, for example, did God intervene with the Egyptians (bringing them plagues against the laws of nature) or in the time of Ahasuerus and Haman (in a manner consistent with nature); but not in Auschwitz? Why in Auschwitz did He lend human evil unlimited authority to destroy and be destroyed? Did God's promise to Jeremiah not obligate Him, as it were, to intervene every time Israel was in danger of annihilation and to prevent it? Why did He not prevent the worst annihilation in human history? There is no answer.

I sympathize with those who claim that in order for a person to achieve responsibility for his actions, he must first be fully free, without any obstacles and external influences. To be sure, the knowledge of good and evil itself influences a person to choose the good; but, when he chooses evil, he must, in order to merit punishment, have committed evil fully out of free choice, without any external intervention. Any kind of intervention, even from God,

reduces a person's responsibility for his actions.¹⁷ It is possible, therefore, that God will remain aloof. In order not to diminish a person's freedom to act – and thereby diminish his responsibility – God may stand apart, facing utter evil without intervening and without responding. Something like this happened in the time of the Shoah. God did not intervene and did not respond, but stood apart.

The well-known homilies on the verse "I am with him [Israel] in suffering" (*imo anochi b'tsara*: Psalms 93:16) may have been offered in this spirit. The Holy One grieves for Israel's grief but without putting an end to it, because He does not want to intervene in humanity's freedom to perform evil. But this homily is also applied when Israel suffers because they have sinned and God has punished them. Thus, for example, in Midrash Lamentations, "When they sinned and their enemies entered Jerusalem, ... the Holy One said 'I wrote in the Torah, *I am with him in suffering*, but now that my children are overladen with suffering, shall I remain at ease?'" (Ch. 2, at the end of section 6). God grieves for the grief of Israel even when Israel causes it.

Intentionally, I have not made any use of the concept of "the hiding of God's face" (*bester panim*) that is so prevalent in the literature of Holocaust theology.¹⁸ According to this concept, God hid his face during the time of the Shoah and allowed whatever happened to happen. I reject this notion, because, as indicated in Deuteronomy, the hiding of God's face arises as a consequence of sin (31:17-18). This meaning appears explicitly in Isaiah: "Your sins have made Him turn His face away and refuse to hear you" (59:2). If we believed that "the hiding of God's face" prevailed during the Shoah, then it would be as if we attributed the Shoah to sin, which is the very notion that we have rejected. God, as it were, restrained Himself from taking part in history and gave humanity an opportunity to display its capacities, for good or for evil. It is our misfortune that, in the time of the Shoah, humanity displayed its capacities for unprecedented evil.

But the question still persists: why during *our* generation in particular did God choose not to intervene, despite His having intervened in previous epochs

¹⁷ See Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance, Ch. 5.

¹⁸ And it already appears in Abravanel, in his commentary on Joshua 7:20.

to save Israel from annihilation? Why in *our* generation in particular did He choose not to interfere with the freedom and moral license of evildoers, when He did interfere in previous times and even hardened Pharaoh's heart? Why was our generation singled out?

I certainly have no answer to this question and must be instructed by Isaiah's words,¹⁹ when he rebuked King Hezekiah and said, according to Talmudic tradition: "Why do you concern yourself with the secrets of the Merciful One?" (*b'hadi kivshi d'rachmana lamah lakh?* — Berachot 10a). Indeed! But I still long to find an appropriate metaphor to capture the singular fate of our generation, who suffered so terribly, not because of anything they did, nor as a result of any misdeeds of their own. It was their misfortune to have lived at a time during which cosmic adjustments had to be made between the human creature, as a creature with free will, and the divinity that is immanent in all parts of creation, including the domain of moral choice. "No place is empty of Him." Not for nothing do we call God *hamakom*, "the Place." Without Him, there is no existence.

Lurianic Kabbalah teaches us²⁰ that, before the creation of humankind, God contracted Himself, as it were, in order to leave space for the creation of an autonomous creature – the human being. But God's presence in the formation of humankind caused the "Divine Contraction" (*tsimtsum*) itself to be contracted and thus limited, which meant that space for human freedom was also limited. In order to nurture human autonomy, it was therefore necessary to re-adjust the *tsimtsum*, to restore and strengthen it and, thereby, to expand the area in which humanity could exercise its free will. This readjustment was necessary because, as God contracts into Himself, He leaves a vacuum in His wake (*chillel rek*); and, since a vacuum is not self-maintaining, the divine must continually regenerate it. This means, however, that the divine continually re-enters the vacuum, reintroducing divine being into its emptiness and thus, effectively, "gnawing away" at the vacuum itself. God's intervention in history, in particular the history of Israel, is among the most important sources of this "gnawing away."

¹⁹ In TB *Berachot* 10a.

²⁰ See what is written by Chaim Vital in his introduction to the book *Etz Chayim* (Tree of Life).

Lest the divine presence devour the *tsimtsum* altogether, and vitiate free will, the Holy One periodically regenerates the *tsimtsum*: restoring it to its original source and thus enabling free will to function as before. This occurs very rarely, and has no parallel in history. However, when it does occur, humanity would be brought to the summit of its moral freedom, to be exercised for good or for evil – from the point at which there is only a minimal of intervention from Above, until the divine has re-equalized the normal balance between humanity's bounded freedom and the absolute freedom of God. At that point, God would have restored history to what we understand, according to the Tanakh, to be its normal place. Since God will continue to intervene in history, we should expect that it will be necessary, in the course of time, for the *tsimtsum* to be restored and adjusted once again. Let us hope that the free will that results from this restoration will be exercised for good and not as it was exercised in our generation.

Those murdered in the Shoah lived, as it were, outside of normal history. Their lives depended on how free will would be exercised by those whose freedom was fully liberated by the "restoration of *tsimtsum*" that took place in their days, returning the divine *tsimtsum* to what it was when humanity was created. Unfortunately for their victims and for us, those who exercised this free will exercised it in the most evil of ways, while their victims remained unprotected and undefended, without any intervention from Above. *They suffered and died, but for nothing they had done. The cause of their suffering was cosmic.*

PRAYER IN THE SHOAH

In rabbinic literature, it is said that the Holy One also prays. The source of this saying is in the Babylonian Talmud (*Berachot* 7a), which reads:

R. Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yose: From where do we know that the Holy One Blessed be He prays? [In the language of hyperbole and parable, it appears that the Holy One teaches prayer to Israel and commands them to pray.]²¹ For it is said, "I will bring them to My holy mountain and

²¹ R. Saadya Gaon, as quoted in the *Sefer Yetzira* of R. Judah of Barcelona (pp. 34-35).

lead them to rejoice in House of My prayer (*b'vet tefilati*)" (Isaiah 56:7). It does not say "in the house of *their* prayer" (*b'vet tefilatam*), but rather "in the house of My prayer" (*b'vet tefilati*). This teaches that the Holy One Blessed be He prays." [The Gemara then asks:] What does He pray? (*mai mitsale?*) Mar Zutra son of Tuviya said in the name of Rav: [It is said²² that the Holy One prays and says:] May it be My will that My mercy conquer My anger and that My mercy redeem²³ My attribute [of strict judgment], and that I behave toward My children according to the attribute of mercy and judge them leniently (*lifnim mishuarat badin*).

A prayer by the Holy One is enigmatic. People pray because they desire something they do not have, something beyond their abilities to acquire. But the Holy One has everything in His hand, and if He needs to have His mercy conquer His anger, who can hold Him back? We must therefore explain (following the Rashbah in his commentary on the *Aggadot Hashbas*) that this prayer is, as it were, God's request of the people Israel to make it possible for Him, the Holy One, to subdue His anger. It is a way of entreating Israel to reform their conduct enough to empower His mercy to rule over His anger, so that, if it were necessary to judge them, He would do so leniently (*lifnim mishurat badin*). But if Israel's sins grew worse and their crimes increased beyond measure, then there would be no escape from their being judged measure for measure, punishment for sin, and who knows if they could survive it?

The commentators pointed out long ago, however, that the sages say explicitly that the Holy One prays. Although the Tanakh does not describe God's praying in any corporeal way, nevertheless, we may learn this indirectly from several verses of the Torah, of which the most prominent is this verse from Deuteronomy 5:26: "May it be [*mi yiten*, which is a term of prayer] that their hearts always move them to revere Me and follow all My commandments, so that it may go well with them and with their children forever!" At the same time, there is still a difference between such verses of Torah and the saying of the rabbis. In the Torah, the purpose of prayer is to prevent sin, so that the

²² Rav did not come to comment on the words of R. Yohanan who was younger than him, but offered these words on his own.

²³ Onkolos translates Genesis 43:30, "his compassion was stirred" as "his compassion was redeemed." (Ets Yosef).

people will not sin and thereby merit punishment (“to revere Me...”); and, as it is said, “the fear of heaven is not from heaven,” which means that God cannot rule over the fear of heaven or prevent humans from failing in it. The sages soften the Torah’s lesson, however: “For there is no righteous person in the land who would do good and not sin” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). Punishment is a part of reality, and there is no generation without sinners nor without their being punished for their sins. God’s prayer is that the punishment would be restrained by the attribute of mercy.

I would add that, after the Shoah, this prayer of the Holy One acquires an additional feature: a petition directed to those who exercise free will, whether they are members of the people Israel (*bnei brii*) or not. The petition is that they turn their hearts to the good, that they choose “what I desire” (Isaiah 56:4) and do not bring the world to chaos (*tobu vavobu*). There is no evil in history comparable to the evil power of those who exercised their free will to bring about the Shoah. They acquired this power as a consequence of the “renewal of tsimtsum” (*hitchadshut batsimtsum*), a very rare, cosmic phenomena. Despite the enigmatic character of “God’s praying,” there is reason to add this supplement to God’s prayer as a metaphor for this enormous and ominous tragedy – *as if He Himself stood, as it were, powerless before these horrible events and expressed his grief in petitionary prayer.*

Now we may answer the question with which we opened this discussion: what prayer uniquely characterizes prayer in the concentration camps and forced labor camps? It is the prayer that asks God to eliminate the free will of the perpetrators and to take the reins of government back into His hands. A prayer like this is the prayer recited in the Rosh Hashanah Amidah, “God and God of our Ancestors, rule over all the world, in Your full glory.” The sages, as is well known, introduced only one blessing – the blessing of the day” (*birkat hayom*) – into the Sabbath and Holiday Amidah, as opposed to the twelve (and, later, the thirteen) petitionary blessings they introduced into the daily Amidah. The petitions introduce a note of sadness that accompanies a person when he asks about his own needs, and the sages did not want to introduce sadness into the days on which we are commanded “to rejoice and declare the day a delight” (*l’smoach u’likro oneg*).²⁴ To be sure, the intermediate blessings (of Sabbath and Holiday) also include spiritual requests,

such as “sanctify us in Your commandments,” and “purify our hearts to serve You in truth,” but the sages evidently assumed that, unlike material requests, spiritual requests intensify the flow of spiritual energy and elevate the joy of observing the holiday.

The intermediary blessings for Sabbath and Holidays have similar themes, except for the added theme of “Divine Sovereignty” (*malkhut*) on Rosh Hashanah, for which we have the supplemental phrase, “Rule over all the world in Your full glory.” This addition is also unique, since it does not constitute a direct petition for our own needs. It is, for example, unlike the Alenu prayer – which it otherwise resembles²⁵ – because it lacks such immediate and tangible entreaties as “Remove abominations from the earth,” or “To turn all the wicked of the earth to You,” or as in the prayer, “sanctify us in Your commandments,” that follows “Rule over the world...”. The prayer, “Rule over all the world, in Your full glory,” is formulated wholly as a petition for God’s own good, that He would rule, that He would be glorified, that He would appear. Its benefits for us would be solely indirect: if God would rule...then the government of the world would be conducted according to justice and law. But we do not make this request directly.

In the concentration camps and forced labor camps, this supplemental phrase acquired additional and decisive meanings. The prisoners perceived the incomprehensible evil that happened as the consequence of the Holy One’s abdicating His rule, of His transferring the reins of government into the cruel hands of bloodsuckers, and of His own decision not to intervene against them but to grant them unlimited authority. Against them, they prayed, “Rule over all the world in Your full glory. And may everything, may every creature know that You created it, and everything that moves know that You move it...” And they said: “Now these villains behave like gods. Life and death is in their hands; by their will life is given, and by their will life is taken away. Remove this power from them and punish them according to their deeds, and

²⁴ *Birkbat Hamazon* (“Grace after Meals”) is an exception, because it includes petitions for our material needs (in the prayer, *Retse v’bachalitsenu*, “O strengthen us”), yet we offer it on Sabbaths as well as weekdays. Nevertheless, the commentators have already reflected on this and accepted it.

²⁵ Both of them may possibly have been composed by the same author. We know that the Alenu was composed by Abba Arikna (Rav), who died in the middle of the third century in Babylonia.

then every soul will say "The Lord God of Israel is King and His dominion" – the right and true one – "rules over all."

EPILOGUE

I will conclude with what I myself experienced (*"didi hava uvdah"*), as narrated in my memoir, "A Leaf Not Driven," *Aleh Lo Nadaf*. I was in the forced labor camp at Wolfsberg, one of the camps of Gross-Rosen (in Lower Silesia), from May 1944 until February 1945. In the camp, we were given a day off every second Sunday, during which we could remain in the camp and, ostensibly, tend to our own needs. But, since the SS were looking for "volunteers" for work outside the camp, and such "volunteering" consumed the entire day in hard labor, whoever could would hide from them. On Sundays, unlike regular days of work, the SS did not call names according to their lists, but would seize people as they found them. Whoever was not caught this way was able to avoid the claws of the SS. But, when there was a shortage of workers, the SS went searching, and whoever was caught hiding could anticipate a whipping if not more. One time I was one of those caught. I was hiding under a bed, and an SS trooper entered the room. The room was supposed to be empty, but, like a dog, he smelled the scent of flesh. When he raised his whip, I pleaded with him in German, and I began saying "Herr Obersturmführer, Merciful One" (*harachaman*). *And I escaped by the skin of my teeth.*

I cannot judge how much this supplication helped me stay alive and not collapse under the lashing. But every day I grieve for having used this holy word, "Merciful One" (*harachaman*) – which appears in the sources only in relation to the Holy One – to pray for mercy from this villain. I simply knew no other words of entreaty. I drew them from the prayerbook and translated them directly into German. Perhaps, subconsciously, I thought of the SS, as it were, as a god. They ruled over the camp with absolute authority; life and death – literally – were in their power, and I unconsciously used an expression appropriate to God.

May it be Your will that, by virtue of my having understood the correct meaning of the prayer, "מְלוֹךְ עַל כָּל־הָעוֹלָם בְּכֹבֶד" – "Rule over all the world in

Your full glory," that all the world comes to eradicate the condition that ruled in the forced labor camp. May it be Your will to repair the damage I have caused by substituting the profane for the holy. And may we be worthy of beholding the fulfillment of the prayer, "And His dominion rules over all."

(Translated from Hebrew by Peter Ochs)

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2. Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God After Auschwitz," in *Out of the Whirlwind*, edited by A.H. Friedlander (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 465-476.
3. On the uniqueness of the Shoah, see Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return to History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and a New Jerusalem* (New York: Schocken, 1978); and Steven Katz, "The Uniqueness of the Holocaust: The Historical Dimension," in *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, edited by Allen S. Rosenbaum (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978), pp. 19-37.
4. On the "Hiding of the Face" (*histarta panim*), see the writings of my late friend, Eliezer Berkowitz, *Faith After the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav, 1973); and *With God in Hell* (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1979).
5. Norman Lamm, "The Face of God: Thoughts on the Holocaust," an address delivered to students of Yeshivah College, May 6, 1986.
6. Those who regard the Shoah as a consequence of sin may be divided into three groups, according to what they consider to be the specific sin that led to the people's destruction:
 - a. *Those for whom the sin was Zionism*: This opinion is identified primarily with the Satmar Rebbe. See *Vayoel Moshe* – the Introduction, in particular – (Hebrew) (New York, 1959); and "On Redemption and Ruth 4:7" (Hebrew) (New York, 1967).
 - b. *Those for whom the sin was anti-Zionism manifested as failure to make aliyah to Israel*: See Rabbi Y.S. Taichtal, *A Happy Mother Of Children* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 5743); and Rabbi Menachem Emmanuel Chartum, "Reflections on the Shoah," *Deot* 18 (Hebrew) (Winter 1961): 28-37. See also L. Kaplan, *Tradition* (Fall 1980): 235-48.
 - c. In yeshivah circles, the more widespread opinion was that the sin was Haskalah in general (the Jewish Enlightenment) and the way the intellectuals transformed Berlin into their Jerusalem. They cite what

was written by the author of Meschech Chochmah (R. Meir Simcha Cohen) in his commentary on Parashat Bechukotai (Leviticus 26:44), “Yet even then...” (Hebrew); and, before him, by the Netsiv in his commentary (Hebrew), *The Gate of Israel* (Sha’ar Yisrael). There are also some who link the Shoah to the “Footsteps of the Messiah” (ikvata d’meshicha). See the collection of the sayings and writings of R. Elchanan Wasserman (Hebrew) (New York, 5747), p. 10; and the “Holy Fire” (Hebrew) of the Hasidische Rebbe of Piaseczna; and citations from the ultra-orthodox newspaper articles and monographs in Rabbi Y. Steinberg, *The World of the Yeshivah and the Shoah*, Part II (Hebrew) (Mahanayim: Kislev, 5755), pp. 210-13.

I also have an article in Yiddish by Chaim Bakan, “Why Did the Holy One Cause World War II?” (I do not know the name of the book in which the article appears). The author also cites the *Paths of Life and Peace* by Rav of Munkatz (Hebrew); the *Ot Tarna*, a commentary on the Introduction to the rabbinical responsa *Achiezer*, Part III (Hebrew); and Steiffler, *Life of the World* (Hebrew), according to which the Shoah began in Germany because of the assimilation and reform that took place among German Jews. Steiffler also cites the opinion that the Shoah came to repair the sins of all the previous generations. The souls that had previously sinned were reincarnated and made to suffer terrible trials in order to be cleansed of their sin. “This is the accounting that has gone on now for one thousand years.”

B. Maza, *With Fury Poured Out: A Torah Perspective on the Holocaust* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1986), identifies three categories of sin behind the Shoah: Zionism, assimilation, and secularism. The author writes “we see that now decades after the Shoah, there is a renewal of Torah... Perhaps it was therefore the will of the Creator to sacrifice those [who died in the Shoah – a million and a half children!] so that the Torah and the people of Israel [!] would live.” This citation also appears in a work by Jonathan Sacks, *The Holocaust in Jewish Ideology* (Valentine Mitchell, 1988), p. 156.

Irving Greenberg offers a very different approach in his “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?*, edited by Eva Fleischer (New York: Ktav, 1977).

For a summary of these various opinions, see Eliezer Schweid (cited above);

and Dan Cohn Sherbok, *Holocaust Theology* (London: Lamp Press, 1989), pp. 15-23, 56-65; and the articles in J. Sacks cited above; and Howard Joseph, "Some Jewish Theological Reflections on the Holocaust," in *Truth and Compassion: Essays on Judaism and Religion in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Solomon Frank*, edited by Howard Joseph, Jack N. Lightstone, and Michael Oppenheim (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983), pp. 191-99.

The Writings cited here deal with Holocaust theology. In our essay, we discuss prayer during the Shoah. For a discussion of prayer after the Shoah, see the essay of my childhood friend, Eliezer Wiesel, "Prayer and the Modern Person," in *Jewish Prayer: Continuity and Innovation*, edited by Gabriel Chaim Cohen (Ramat Gan: The Institute for Judaism and Contemporary Thought, 1978), pp. 13-26.

NOTES

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